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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-second year

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 19 of General Assembly resolution 51/195 B of 17 December 1996, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it every three months during its fifty-first session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan. The report, which describes the main developments in Afghanistan during the first three months since the adoption of the resolution, is also intended to fulfil the request by the Security Council for regular information on Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Military situation

2. The military situation in Afghanistan witnessed yet another upset at the beginning of 1997, with the Taliban forces sweeping through most of the positions held to the north of Kabul by the opposition coalition called the Supreme Council for the Defence of Afghanistan (SCDA), which is composed of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan, led by General Rashid Dostum; the Jamiat-i-Islami, led by Mr. Burhanuddin Rabbani and Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud; and the Hezb-i-Wahdat led by Mr. Karim Khalili. The Taliban seem to be intent on pressing ahead with their military effort to take the remaining areas still controlled by SCDA. The situation at the front lines

remains volatile, and there are reports of preparations for more fighting when spring arrives.

3. The Taliban launched a major offensive on 16 January, a day after the end of the United Nations-initiated ceasefire talks in Islamabad, and immediately captured Bagram airbase, as well as Charikar, the capital of Parwan province north of Kabul. On 23 January, they captured two other strategic towns, Jabal-os-Saraj and Gulbahar, effectively confining the forces of General Dostum to the north of the Hindu Kush and those of Commander Massoud to the Panjsher valley. During the night of 26-27 January, SCDA forces blew up a section of the Salang highway 25 kilometres north of Jabal-os-Saraj in an attempt to block the Taliban's northward thrust along that highway. The blockade of the Salang pass compelled the Taliban to turn westward for a detour to the northern areas controlled by SCDA. They started advancing along the Gharband valley towards the central province of Bamyan and, on 2 February, occupied Sheikh Ali in Parwan province, 20 kilometres east of the strategic Shebar pass, which commands access to Bamyan, as well as to the northern areas under the control of General Dostum. While consolidating the areas already captured, the Taliban are believed to be preparing for an attack on the pass. On 20 and 21 February, the Hezb-i-Wahdat forces of Mr. Karim Khalili, supported by General Dostum, attacked the Taliban positions in Sheikh Ali, but were not able to dislodge them from the area.

4. The Taliban and SCDA forces were also locked in a drawn-out confrontation in Badghis province, in north-western Afghanistan, with sporadic fighting continuing in the area around the Morgab river. The front line moved back and forth several times across the river, while Qala-i-Naw, the provincial capital of Badghis, remained in Taliban hands despite repeated attempts by SCDA forces to capture it.

5. Unrest also occurred in other locations in Afghanistan. During the night of 28 January, Jalalabad, the provincial capital of Nangarhar, was attacked by an unidentified armed group. There was an exchange of gunfire and rockets before the group was repulsed by the Taliban. On 8 February, fighting broke out in Kunar province between the Taliban and some local forces affiliated with the Hezb-i-Islami, led by Mr. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Afghan National Liberation Front (ANFL), led by Mr. Sibghatullah Mojaddedi. The conflict was soon brought under control by Taliban reinforcements. On 23 February, fighting took place between Hezb-i-Islami and SCDA forces near Pul-i-Khumri in Baghlan province over local disputes among their commanders. Fighting was also reported between the local factions in Kunduz.

6. At the end of the reporting period, the Taliban controlled 19 of the 30 provinces of Afghanistan, together with significant parts of Badghis, Parwan and Kapisa provinces. SCDA is confined to eight northern provinces, in addition to parts of Badghis, Parwan and Kapisa provinces.

Political situation

7. Political and military developments in Afghanistan are always closely intertwined. Internally, the rival sides continue to seek political legitimacy for their military activities. The Taliban, judging both from their words and from their activities on the ground, appear determined to gain military and

political control of the whole of Afghanistan and to establish their vision of an Islamic State. They view the other side as opposed to this goal. While consolidating their control of two thirds of the country, the Taliban have persistently demanded formal recognition by the international community as the effective Islamic government of Afghanistan, entitled to occupy the Afghan seat in the United Nations General Assembly. The SCDA alliance objects to the Taliban's forcible imposition of their will on the rest of Afghanistan. Both the Taliban and SCDA are widely believed to have been receiving material and financial support from external allies, while each side blames the other for encouraging foreign interference in the internal affairs of the country.

8. The military developments in Afghanistan, especially the Taliban's recent advances northwards, have caused considerable concern to the countries in the region and beyond. The Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Turkey met at Istanbul on 5 January to discuss the Afghan situation and adopted a declaration that called on the Afghan parties to observe a ceasefire during the coming holy month of Ramadan and to resolve their differences peacefully. They pointed out that a military solution was not a feasible option in Afghanistan.

9. The Islamic Republic of Iran convened a meeting of the Afghan parties at Tehran on 25 and 26 January. Mr. Norbert Holl, Head of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan, attended the meeting as an observer, along with representatives of Pakistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan. However, the Taliban and the Hezb-i-Wahdat (Mr. Karim Khalili) did not take part. The Tehran meeting adopted a declaration that expressed concern over the continuation of armed conflict in Afghanistan and urged the warring parties to abandon the course of hostilities in favour of a constructive dialogue for a settlement.

10. On 24 and 25 February, the Defence Ministers of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan met at Tashkent and reaffirmed their commitment to joint defence made at Almaty on 4 October 1996.

11. In the last three months, the Security Council has held several consultations on Afghanistan during which members expressed concern at the renewed hostilities in Afghanistan. The Council called for a ceasefire and an early resolution of the conflict through negotiation among the warring parties. The Council also reaffirmed its full support for the peacemaking efforts of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan.

Humanitarian situation

12. In spite of continued instability in certain areas, humanitarian activities are being carried out by United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations throughout Afghanistan. Certain policies of the Taliban, in particular with regard to the access of women to education and employment and other human rights issues, remain a source of deep concern.

13. The international community recently took note of the continued displacement of people in several areas of the country, including Badghis province and the cities of Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. It also noted with apprehension the reported forcible displacement of people from villages north of

Kabul. During the period from 24 February to 2 March, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees registered some 4,600 internally displaced persons at the Khair Khana checkpoint north of Kabul, bringing the total since 2 January 1997 to over 115,000. These arrivals have placed increased pressure upon the already difficult living conditions in Kabul.

14. While providing emergency assistance to the internally displaced persons, the United Nations has requested the Taliban authorities to take measures, including the issuance of an official statement, to encourage the return to home communities. United Nations agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross have stressed to local authorities that a return to these areas is a priority for all humanitarian organizations.

15. In addition to these humanitarian concerns, the Taliban detained in Kabul on 21 February two French nationals working for Action contre la faim, a French-based non-governmental organization, I have appealed to the Taliban authorities through the Head of the Special Mission for the immediate release of the two workers, and the Security Council on 25 February also urged their release. Incidents such as these continue to inhibit the international community's ability to respond to Afghanistan's pressing humanitarian needs.

16. Given the prevailing circumstances in the country, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat, in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme, convened an International Forum on Assistance to Afghanistan, on 21 and 22 January 1997 at Ashgabat. The Head of the Special Mission addressed the Forum, stressing a close link between the provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan by the donor community and progress towards a political settlement in Afghanistan. He also reiterated the need to continue humanitarian aid to Afghanistan despite ongoing hostilities. As the Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs informed the Security Council on 28 January, efforts are currently under way to develop a strategic framework which, taking into account agreed principles and priorities, will address immediate relief as well as longer-term rehabilitation and development needs in Afghanistan.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

17. The United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan has continued to focus its efforts on an immediate ceasefire through negotiations, under its good offices, among the warring parties. In pursuance of this goal, the Head of the Special Mission and his team have held several meetings with the Taliban and the SCDA leaders, as well as other Afghan personalities.

18. From 13 to 15 January, the Special Mission convened at Islamabad an Intra-Afghan Working Group, which, for the first time, brought together the representatives of the Taliban and SCDA. The Taliban side was represented by Mullah Wakil Ahmed, Mufti Masoom Afghani and Mullah Abdul Wahab. The three factions of SCDA were represented by General Mohammed Painda (for General Dostum), Engineer Mohammed Ishaq (for Commander Massoud) and Mr. Rasul Taleb (for Mr. Karim Khalili). In a frank and friendly atmosphere, the Working Group discussed a ceasefire, including the establishment of an all-

party commission to supervise it; the exchange of prisoners and bodies; the status of Kabul as a neutral city administered by a civilian authority; the deployment of a neutral police force; and the establishment of a broad-based Islamic government in Afghanistan. As it was not a decision-making body, the Working Group discussed these issues ad referendum. The participants agreed that the Working Group should continue to exist, as it provided the parties with a valuable forum for political dialogue in a free and secure environment.

19. The second meeting of the Intra-Afghan Working Group was held at the office of the Special Mission in Islamabad from 24 to 26 February. Mullah Mohammed Sadiq, Mufti Masoom Afghani and Hajji Fazal Mohammed represented the Taliban. General Mohammed Painda and Mr. Rasul Taleb represented SCDA, while Engineer Mohammed Ishaq was not able to attend owing to bad weather. The Working Group had an extensive exchange of views on the evolving situation in Afghanistan. It discussed at length such important matters as confidence-building measures, the draft of a ceasefire agreement prepared by the Special Mission, the exchange of prisoners and the situation in Kabul. Both sides agreed to continue their negotiations on all pending issues and requested the Special Mission to make new proposals on these issues for further discussion between the political leaders of both sides in the near future.

20. At the meeting, the two sides tentatively agreed to the proposal of the Special Mission that a political-level meeting between General Dostum and Mullah Rabbani be convened by 17 March to discuss key issues considered by the Working Group. The two sides were also in agreement that they would establish a list of up to 50 prisoners of war for exchange as a confidence-building measure.

21. Upon the conclusion of the second meeting of the Working Group, the Head of the Special Mission travelled to Kandahar on 4 March to discuss with the Taliban Shura member and Governor of Kandahar, Mullah Mohammad Hassan, the next steps to be taken, including the proposed political meeting and the prisoner-of-war exchange. On 6 March, he flew to Mazar-i-Sharif for talks with General Dostum to discuss the same matter.

22. The Head of the Special Mission also held various consultations with other Member States in an effort to seek and coordinate their assistance to the activities of the Special Mission. On 21 January, he met with the President of Turkmenistan, Mr. Saparmurad Niyazov, in Ashkhabad, and the following day with the President of Uzbekistan, Mr. Islam Karimov, in Tashkent in order to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and the support these countries could provide to the United Nations peace efforts. On the occasion of his visit to Tehran to attend the meeting on Afghanistan on 25 and 26 January, he also discussed Afghanistan with the leaders of Iran. Similar consultations were held in Islamabad with officials and envoys of several countries.

IV. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

23. The situation in Afghanistan remains precarious. Success in the United Nations peace efforts remains elusive. The military situation is dangerously fluid and may soon deteriorate further with the onset of the spring thaw. Despite the continuous suffering of the Afghan people, the warring factions have

not heeded the repeated appeals for peace and appear determined to pursue the military option. However, I remain convinced that a negotiated settlement is the only solution to this long-standing conflict and that the United Nations is the most appropriate forum to bring this about. No one should imagine that a military victory by one party over the others will resolve the Afghan problem in the long term.

24. I believe that the United Nations and its Member States have to increase efforts to address the Afghan question before the situation deteriorates still further. It is necessary for us all to coordinate our efforts so as to increase international pressure on the Afghan parties to solve the conflict in a peaceful way. To this end, I propose to convene a meeting of concerned countries shortly, using the formula that was used for the meeting held in New York on 18 November 1996. The aim of the meeting would be to reassess the situation following recent political/military developments and to discuss how best to promote a negotiated settlement of the conflict, including reinforcing the United Nations peacemaking efforts.

25. I should also like to take note of proposals that an intra-Afghan meeting among the warring parties be held outside Afghanistan in order to provide an opportunity for them to talk to each other in a secure environment. I intend to consult the Afghan parties, Member States and international organizations, in particular the Organization of the Islamic Conference, on the advisability of such a meeting, and will put forward a concrete plan if and when I decide that it will contribute to the peace process.

26. I should like to conclude this report by renewing my appeal to the warring factions in Afghanistan to cease all hostilities and take up serious and honest negotiations under the good offices of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan. I also urge the countries with interest and influence in Afghanistan to coordinate their activities with those of the Special Mission and to refrain from supporting one Afghan party against others, thus prolonging the conflict.